ED 423 162 PC: PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM OR PETTY CARPING?

1 OF 1

DAVISON, TREVOR

94 19P.

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 162 SO 028 491

AUTHOR Davison, Trevor
TITLE PC: Philosophical Criticism or Petty Carping?
PUB DATE 1994-04-00
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Australian Teacher Education Conference (24th, Brisbane, Australia, July 3-6, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Freedom; *Criticism; Cultural Awareness; *Educational Philosophy; Ethics; Foreign Countries; Freedom of Speech; Ideology; Multicultural Education; *Political Correctness; Politics; Values

ABSTRACT

This paper presents two central themes: (1) communicative symbols teachers use are often inextricably linked with their personal politics; and (2) the present media obsession with "political correctness" (PC) offers a valuable opportunity for teachers to critically evaluate their practices and reflect on their own values, beliefs, assumptions, and ways of interpreting the world and acting in and on it. The paper examines the "political correctness" debate and offers an analytical continuum to suggest that much of this debate swings between philosophical criticism and "petty carping." Examples from the politically correct lexicon are analyzed with the researcher demonstrating much that is laudable in the PC debate, yet suggesting a philosophical and educational void in some areas of that same debate. The study focuses on particular implications of the debate for self-reflective teaching practice as a means for evaluation and improvement of teaching. (EH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 423 162

A paper presented at the
Australian Teacher Education Conference,
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
July 3-6, 1994.

PC:
Philosophical Criticism or Petty Carping?

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TREVOR DAVISON

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dr. Trevor Davison
Faculty of Education
Central Queensland University

SO 028 491

P.C.: Philosophical Criticism or Petty Carping?

Introduction

There are two central themes in this paper. One, that the communicative symbols (words, gestures, etc) teachers use, as obvious components of their teaching practice, are often inextricably linked with, and cannot be understood independent from, their personal politics. Moreover, that a teacher's politics also often underpins their classroom policies. Two, that the present media obsession with, and seemingly general public interest in, "political correctness" offers a valuable opportunity for teachers to evaluate their practices critically and for people in general to reflect on their own values, beliefs, assumptions, ways of interpreting the world and acting in and on it.

To justify these claims I will start by focusing on the so-called "political correctness debate"[1] and offer an analytical continuum to suggest that much of this debate swings between philosophical criticism and petty carping[2]. By examining a few examples from the politically correct lexicon, I hope to demonstrate that there is much that is laudable in the PC debate. However, I will also suggest that in that same debate there is often a philosophical and educational void.

After examining these examples I focus on one in particular that has obvious implications for teaching practice. The overarching implication will be that encouraging **all** teachers to differentiate and discriminate between the philosophy and the carping is one means to promote those self-reflective skills often necessary for the evaluation and improvement of teaching.

Petty Carping vs Philosophical Criticism.

Whenever a reference is made to political correctness, there is, at root, a concern over the perceived appropriate use of words and word meaning[3]. The meaning of words has been one of the most central and recurring themes in Western philosophy. For instance, the answer(s) to what some specific words mean has been seen as the key to solving moral and social problems. Plato's (1979) analysis of *justice* and Berlin's (1969) analysis of *liberty* are just two obvious examples.

---

[1] Whether specific examples are evidence of a "debate" is an interesting topic in itself. Throughout this paper I use *debate* very loosely.

[2] There is probably no-one who is simply and always to be "found" at one end of this continuum or the other. Dependent on our moods, where we are, what the subject is, who we are communicating with and how we do this, many of us will be continually moving from one end to the other.

[3] The issues I raise here are equally applicable to communicative symbols other than words. Individuals composite of specific language-using communities use symbols other than words to communicate with one another. Communication also occurs through physical gestures and body language in general. Cross-cultural (or cross-community) differences over the meaning of these symbols are often central and fundamental to very real problems that particular human beings within them face. For instance, in the US the "young-black-swaggering-male" is often interpreted by many white (mostly middle and upper-class) females as "rap-loving-crack-smoking-sex-mad-animal". This interpretation can be both the **result of** and **lead to** specific relations (or lack thereof) between blacks and whites there. On a lighter note, who can forget George Bush visiting Australia and giving the "Fuck-off" sign while believing he was giving the "Victory" one? There must have been thousands of Australians who witnessed that event and instantly made some pejorative judgement about Bush. A flick of a wrist would have made a world of difference.

A more contemporary trend has been to address the meaning of *meaning* itself. Russell (1988), Wittgenstein (1968), Quine (1960), Davidson (1991), and Kripke (1980) are just a few examples of those philosophers who have viewed the search for the meaning of *meaning* as a metaphysical rather than a moral or social enquiry. For these philosophers, answering the question of the meaning of *meaning* is **the** means of best understanding the ontological status of "reality", existence itself.

The contribution of that strand of philosophy known as analytical philosophy to the problem of the meaning of *meaning* is summarised by this simple statement: Meaning is use[4]. Put simply what this means is how language is used is what it means. In other words, because we cannot get "inside" people's heads or successfully answer those questions that have no empirical basis; questions of metaphysics, **questions of meaning**, then answers to the meaning of words can only be found in how they are used. Hence, the best answers we can get to what words mean is by focusing on who uses them and how, when and why they are used. Language-users use specific communicative symbols alone and in various combinations with others for particular reasons in certain contexts and that's all there is.

Knowing how, when and why to use words for particular reasons at certain times is something that is learned. Learning the language of the community one is born into is the most outstanding example of how human beings can learn and learn well (to basically pre-determined and public standards) without the need for massive bureaucracies, artificially constructed places of learning and professionally preparing and paying other human beings to facilitate this. Children throughout the world develop literacy (and numeracy) skills "*...spontaneously as they play, observe, ask questions, experiment and make sense of the world around them*" (Wood, cited in the Wiltshire Report, Vol.1, p.146, 1994).

Human communities are communities in part because of the rules and conventions they share regarding language usage. Inherent in these rules and conventions are specific imperatives concerning when conditions are appropriate for specific word usage. Sometimes these imperatives are made painfully obvious to us. For example, "Don't you ever use that word again!" is a rejoinder that many parents would be familiar with and one that is an everyday and common instance of a Kantian categorical imperative[5]. Other times, however, these rules and conventions are not so clear-cut. Like most examples inherent to the political correctness debate, there can be questioning, disagreement and contestation about what words should be used, when and why. The reason for this is obvious:

> *Language...is not a free-floating entity, subject to dispassionate analysis and stipulative reformation. Rather language use is intertwined with a range of existential, institutional, historical, cultural, ideological, political, economic relations and one can not talk about language and meaning without at least addressing those kinds of factors* (Pratte, 1992, p.x).

---

[4]There is an old and amusing joke often told by analytical philosophers to express this dictum that underpins their work: "People ask of philosophers "What is the meaning of life?"; we (analytical philosophers) ask "What's the use?"". "Getting" the joke depends on making a distinction between the word 'life' and life itself, the lived experience.

[5]A **categorical imperative**: A personal judgement not dependent on subjective inclinations, preferences, etc. For example, "You ought care for others".
A **hypothetical imperative**: A personal judgement that is "influenced" by subjective inclinations or some other empirical phenomena, eg. "You ought to care for others [if it makes you feel good, if you find it "fun", etc] (Kant, I. 1981, pp.19-24).

Copying sponsored by Konica

Communicative symbols used and inherent in any language cannot be analysed or understood independent of those relations that Pratte identifies. Word use is always **in** context and word meaning is dependent **on** context[6]. All words in the lexicon of any language then are value-laden. Paradoxically, they are value-free until used and learnt how to be used[7]. This is because...

> *...language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system* (Saussure, 1959, p.118).

Each child then has to **learn** appropriate and inappropriate word use for their families, for their community, for their society. It must also **learn** the rules and conventions for appropriate assemblages and combinations of those words.

Therefore, the socialization of members of a language-using community into the norms and mores of how their language "works", which the PC debate seems a microcosm of, is not a new phenomenon. It is fundamental to human language-using communities everywhere and necessary to human evolution itself. It is an indispensable responsibility of parenting and a wider community responsibility of inculcating its young. And obviously, those who work within schools or any educational alternative have never been and are still not immune from responsibilities in this regard.

However, in the industrialised mass-market, high material consumption modern world it could be argued that it **is** new to explicitly and consciously persuade, convince and encourage the widespread adoption of specific words and communicative symbols with the hope that the concepts, ideas, values and beliefs they represent will be accepted by individual members of the language-using community. Besides examples inherent to the PC debate we need only look at mass-advertising to support this claim. The millions of dollars spent on the design of logos and names is

---

[6]Here I am using 'context' to represent two dimensions; intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. The **intrapersonal** dimension refers to the individual's psychological make-up, including attendant values, beliefs, attitudes and "conceptual baggage". The **interpersonal** dimension refers to those forces "outside" of each individual that has contributed to their personal development, eg, historical, political, social, cultural and economic ones.

[7] For example, a child is born into the world and has no idea what the sound *Dad* or the scratchings *Dad* on the crumply-easily-packed-into-the-mouth-quite-tasty stuff has to do with his or her world (It probably has the same kind of bewildered and confused attitude to the actual Dad. After all, what do Dad's offer when you're less than three months old except a warm cuddle with a new smell attached). To the newborn then, *Dad* is value-free. As the child develops it moves from *Dad* being value-free, to all adult-looking male forms being appropriate to attach the tag *Dad* to, onto "reserving *Dad* for that entity it learns it should be reserved for. As this process continues children learn how many people are aware of an entity they can call *Dad* (or its conceptual equivalent in languages other than English) and the perceived importance of the relationship between Dad and offspring. The child may also learn about other uses of *Dad* that are dependent on changes in context, eg some parts of England use *dad* as a synonym for "hit" or "prod" - "If you don't stop that, I'll dad your head!" The use of the word *Dad* is learnt and this includes learning the norms and mores of when specific usages can be made. Thus, as each child learns how to use *Dad* it becomes increasingly value-laden.

Copying sponsored by Konica

not without the aim of affecting people's values, their ways of viewing the world and ultimately, how they spend their income[8]. Yet Philip Adams ("Features", p.2, **The Weekend Australian**, April 23-24, 1994) points out that this is not a new phenomenon either. He comments that for centuries much stock has been placed in the power and value of the crucifix symbol. The swastika was another symbol that motivated millions more individual human beings to rally behind and many more to fear. Other iconoclastic symbols come readily to mind: The skull and cross bones, any national flag, the Golden Arches of McDonalds, *Pepsi*, *Coke*.

Given this longstanding and often unspoken inculcation into appropriate and language and word use it still seems to me that the political correctness debate is different in two important ways. One, because it frequently drags the very process of language socialization and inculcation to the surface of our everyday lived experiences. Two, because it reveals that the fundamental issues are not simply about words or any other kind of communicative symbol. It reveals that the words we use tell us an awful lot about the ideas, concepts, values, beliefs and assumptions we have about ourselves, our relations with the material world and each other. And very often it reinforces Marx's insight that our ideas and concepts are:

> *[I]nterwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life...[as]...[m]en are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.--real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of then intercourse corresponding to these* (1965, p.37).

Discussions and disagreements about words and word usage and the analysis of these can serve to focus our attention on those productive forces that both limits **and** underpin the ideas and concepts that specific words are taken to represent. They can highlight those beliefs and assumptions that are stood forthrightly behind, possessed unknowingly or suppressed sub-consciously, that result in some particular material activity rather than others. And they can also draw our attention to how material conditions often stand as boundaries and barriers to developing new intercourses between human beings.

Unfortunately, much of the political correctness debate is garbage and contributes nothing like this. There are aspects of the debate that reveal how little thought and reflection some people give to their world and that of others. It is in this aspect of the debate that we find the petty carpers.

The petty carpers contribute mostly nothing but harm to debates over word usage and the substantive changes in the lives of people that the use of new or different word(s) or new usage of familiar words is hoped to result in. Their claims are neither reasoned or informed.

At their most stupid, the petty carpers either argue for (or criticise others for arguing for) new words or new word usage based on no better reason than that particular word has the same letters in the same order as

---

[8]Hugh Mackay makes the following interesting point: "If advertisers do indeed have to spend billions each year to achieve their objectives, mightn't this point to the relative impotence of advertising, rather than its awesome power..?" (**The Weekend Australian**, April 23-24, 1994). However, as my colleague Ian Ferguson points out, Mackay ignores the fact that advertising is about market share too. As well as designed to sell products, advertising is also about competing with other products. The millions spent on advertising is also about competition with other producers and convincing their customers to "switch brands".

some other that is attracting attention and criticism. Kurosawa (p.6, **The Weekend Australian Magazine,** February 19-20, 1994) provides a litany of examples. She claims the "*...fine-tuning of the language is all very well [but it is] getting out of hand*". Why? Because there will be "*...no more shenanigans, shebang, sheep, shepherds, sheepdogs - they're all labelled up front with such a sexist three-letter prefix*". In the same vein, Philip Adams suggests *hero* become *shero* ("Features", p.2, **The Weekend Australian**, April 23-24, 1994). Why? For the same reasons that Kurosawa proffers: These particular words have the same letters in them (*s, h, and e*) that have been considered problematic in other words mostly representing different concepts in other contexts.

Silly slippery-slope arguments like these contribute nothing to the discussions and debates about the material conditions of, and relations between, human beings that are highlighted through a sharpened attention to the language used to describe those same conditions and relations. In fact they are damaging to those same debates for it gives people reason to believe that discussions and disagreements about word usage are about words and nothing more.

The petty carpers are just as guilty when they move from this silly concern about the letters in words to believing that the concept(s) that the letters represent in one use are the same concepts in other uses of that same word. A letter in the Rockhampton Bulletin (22/4/94) provides a good example of this when it includes the following sentence: "*Ms Warner, surely this is a case of the pot calling the kettle (racist word deleted)*".

The referent for *(racist word deleted)* is obviously *black*. This is what the petty carpers have done in their ill-informed and naive analysis of what is going on with this sharpened attention to word usage. *Black* is not necessarily a racist word. *Black* is being used here to denote a colour. The euphemism is about two objects being of the same colour. *Black* here has no racist connotations at all. No word has any pejorative or positive connotation until it is used by someone, somehow, someplace sometime for some reason. You can find *black* in the dictionary and you can read of several meanings for *black*. You can go and live in a tribal village in a remote area of Papua New Guinea, speak with elders, use the words *black, bung, nigger, darkie, sambo* or any other English word and you will make no sense at all[9]. These elders do not speak English! These words would mean nothing to them!

Thus, the character played by Holly Hunter in The Piano should not be called *orally challenged* instead of *mute* and neither should Toulouse-Lautrec be called *vertically-challenged* instead of *short* (Adams, ibid) even if the words *mute* and *short* have caused particular problems in other contexts[10]. *Abo, Gin, Wog* (even *Pommie*) and all those other words that get cringed at by some people should not be removed from the language just

---

[9]Whether it is morally acceptable to use these words in this way is another matter entirely. Intuitively, I believe such an action would not be morally permissible. I would like to believe that when people feel that sense of power in using words that are often taken to be objectionable in their language-using community in some totally different language-using community that they also feel some sense of guilt.

[10]One of the central issues in this paper that I need to give more thought to is the relationship between language and thought. Some will argue that because *mute* is often associated with *stupid* then "renaming" people who cannot speak is one means of encouraging others not to make that association. My intuitive response is that if that is how some people perceive people who cannot speak then addressing the "name" and nothing more will change nothing. Naming people who cannot speak *orally challenged* instead of *mute* does nothing with those personal values, beliefs and assumptions that underpin the association of *deaf and dumb* with *stupid*.

because that particular combination of letters in some specific circumstances offends. It is the substantive concerns that the words are tags for which offends, not the words. It is the substantive issues that need addressing. Focusing on just the words and believing that the substantive issues reside in the words and not in the affairs of men and women just misses the point of many of the problems highlighted in some specific aspects of the political correctness debate. Believing that changing words and word usage will address those substantive issues and concerns that have drawn attention to specific words is just plain stupid.

There are "educated" petty carpers too. For instance John Casey (p.26, **The Australian**, 26/3/94) reports that a woman student in higher education in America *"...told a journalist that she would not dream of even opening the pages of Milton "because he was a misogynist" and more to the point, a DWEM-a Dead White European Male".*

Now DWEMs can be rightly accused of all sorts of things but shouldn't the student find this out for themselves? What does it say of the education of that student if she seemingly believes that by definition, *DWEM* means "not worth reading"? The words of J.S. Mill (most definitely a DWEM) are as relevant here as they ever were:

> *...even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly confessed, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds* (1978, p.50).

So, while the influences of post-modernism have rightly drawn our attention to the fact that any example of "reasoned and informed debate" is saturated with personal politics and differences in power, class, gender, culture, ethnicity, giving up on the possibility of taking all these factors into account within the process of reasoned and informed debate will change nothing. Hence, and back to the DWEM-hating student, the post-moderns ought not wish to have it both ways. There is something fundamentally inconsistent about them using the knowledge and skills they have acquired and developed to make their insightful claims about how context, history, gender, power, contributed to the ideas and beliefs of DWEM'S being made known at the expense of others and yet not wanting others to use this same knowledge and skills to learn of these insights for themselves. If we discount the words of DWEMs simply because *DWEM* must mean they are speaking from a privileged position derived from differences in gender, cultural heritage, power, then we run the risk of replacing Great Men Stories with Great **An**-Other ones. Those who dictate that the works of DWEMs are not worth reading only realign power to suit their own agenda. A "we-have-understood-this-you-accept-our-word" approach only replaces DWEMs with LACNEFs (Live and Coloured Non-European Females).

The way the tag *multicultural education* is bandied around the halls of academia is another example where we can witness the "educated" carpers at work. This same tag is also an example which illustrates how complex this whole politically correct thing can get. Why? Well there are all sorts of good reasons for providing multicultural education and any good education library is full of them. Yet these good arguments often have to compete with the one-liners and ill-informed rantings of the petty carpers that seem to attract considerable press coverage and public airing. A personal example will help.

Last year I attended a seminar on multicultural education at The Ohio State University, USA which included some Ph.D students who were about to start work as school principals. *Multicultural education* to them meant

teaching children that males of Anglo-Saxon ancestry were (are?), by definition, history's bad-boys (those naughty DWEMs again) and that there was no reason to believe that Anglo-Saxon philosophies, beliefs, values, were better than any other(s). When asked how they would have dealt with the Nazi mass extermination of Jewish persons, the best response offered was that because the Nazis had (have?) different values to them, they shouldn't judge them by their own standards, but simply try to understand. This meant not "imposing" their (North American-cum-Anglo Saxon) values.

This is an example of the "educated" carpers in action because for these people it seemed that having the words *multicultural education* said often enough around the halls of academia was sufficient. They appeared to confuse saying for doing and used words like mystical charms to construct a hollow verbal reality. Little attention was given to different conceptions of multicultural education and the very real implications these conceptions suggested for human lives, for children in schools. Attempting to discuss the ideology behind moves for multicultural education (who benefits? who loses?) was akin to being an Oliver Stone disciple.[11]

Surely, if we are going to do something in schools about multicultural education then we need to at least examine what the various conceptions of multicultural education are, why people claim it is required, the justifications for these claims and how it could be achieved in practical terms. In a broader sense, it would also require assessing arguments for how people in a multicultural society should treat one another and how public schooling could contribute in some way. And importantly, this would also mean giving careful consideration to arguments that are contrary, even contradictory, to one's own.

Whether one wishes to refer to being able and willing to provide reasonable arguments and justification[12] for particular conceptions of multicultural education (or claims in general) as philosophy, critical thinking or something else is irrelevant. What matters is to cultivate the ability and willingness to consider and reflect on one's own position on whatever issues one deems important **and** the position of those one disagrees with. These are the kinds of activities to be found at the other end of the continuum. Being a philosophical critic rather than a petty carper requires this willingness and ability to reflect critically, to consider carefully.

The problem of course is that even after critical reflection and careful consideration all desires for change, ideas about what should be done, can not be acted on. Not everyone can get their way. Yet if Marx was correct in claiming that*"...the task of philosophy is to change the world and not just interpret it"* (Marx & Engels, 1978, p.145), then changing the world, getting things done, invariably requires agreement of some kind; however tentative, however tenuous and however contested. If decisions about what to do in schools, in classrooms, etc are not to be decided on the basis of gender, of power, but rather, an agreement that acknowledges and takes these factors into account, then philosophical criticism, critical reflection,

---

[11]Oliver Stone: conspiracy theorist *par excellence*. See the movie **JFK** for the paradigm case cited by his critics as evidence for this.

[12]What counts as "good" and reasonable justification, how and who decides which argument is "better" than another are important, difficult issues and ones I will not address here. Many, including Pappas & Swain (1978) and Lehrer (1990) have addressed what counts as justification and how contesting ones can be adjudicated. Others, such as Noddings (1984), Greene ((1988), hooks (1991) and Gilligan (1982) have alerted us to the role and influences of gender, ethnicity and class in all this historically, mostly white male talk, about arguments and justification.

is a necessary requirement. And this is no less the case for disputes and disagreements about word usage.

The petty carpers, however, have nothing to offer except modelling what will not help anyone. On one side of any specific disagreement about word usage they accuse others of wanting such word usage simply because they want to be politically correct. They see people arguing about specific words as being nothing more than linguistically trendy - "They are dedicated mouthers of wordy fashion". (Sing it to the tune of the Kink's "Dedicated Follower of Fashion").

And sometimes they are right. There are those who do join in the politically correct debate at specific and various points to keep up with the latest in word fashion. The evidence for this is the paucity of reasons they provide for some particular word use, the shallowness of those reasons they do provide and their misguided belief that language and word use is more about speaking and talking "politically" correctly than changing the lives and conditions of human beings.

For the more critically oriented - the critical thinkers, the philosophically critically minded - the latter is more obvious. They provide evidence that discussions and debates about specific word usage or new word usage can be about relations between human beings and the human race's relation to the material world.

The political correctness debate gets more complex when examples within in it provide evidence that the skills of philosophical criticism can be used for good **and** bad. People can know full well that they use specific words in particular contexts for certain reasons and be well aware that others will find these reasons and the values, assumptions that underpin them objectionable. When this occurs it is easy to deflect attention by simply accusing any interlocutor of being "politically correct". It is in situations like these that Greene (1993, p.215) sees "political correctness" as *"...that evil orientation named ... by those who want things to stay as they have been"*.

I tend to agree with Greene's sentiments but in this section I have tried to explain how political correctness is much more complex than her reaction to it. In the next section I will argue that the complexity itself has very serious and real implications for teaching practice.

A teacher's politics, policy and practice: One example.

My daughter's schoolteacher recently invited the parents of the children in her class to attend an informal meeting where the teacher explained her classroom policies and teaching practices. One large, vociferous man said he had one question, the answer to which he claimed would make it clear what kind of teacher his son had: "Will you be talking about the **settling** of Australia or the **invasion** of Australia?".

The recent attention given to the claim that the arrival of Europeans in Australia may be best described as an *invasion* is an example that reinforces my claims about political correctness argued for in the last section. This same example also highlights the relationships between a teacher's politics, policy and practice.

At its most genuine, the debate over whether Australia was "invaded", "settled" or otherwise is a **moral** one. The authors of the Social Studies Draft Replacement Unit One, the document at the centre of this debate, are aware of this. Although the Australian trend is to refer to the issues that this unit raises as "social justice" ones, if the objectives of the unit in question include *"...promoting respect for the integrity of all people, critically reflecting on one's own attitudes and feelings and exploring the basis of value judgements"* (Department of Education, 1993, p.11), then the unit itself is clearly a vehicle to be used to encourage

students to think about specific issues in moral terms. It is consistent with that dominant Western view that couches morality in terms of those individual human actions that significantly affect others (eg. Kant, 1981, Peters, 1966, Straughan, 1988, Rawls, 1972).

Now in this sense, teaching is most definitely a moral activity. It significantly affects the lives of students. Premier Goss appears to be aware of the moral nature of teaching in his comments about what Queensland schoolchildren should be taught regarding Australian history. He states that *"...we should seek to understand and accommodate people's sensitivities and not to offend"* (**The Rockhampton Bulletin,** 9/2/94).

"Understanding people's sensitivities" as a precursor to action (in this case, the action of writing what we want schoolchildren to read about Australian history) is necessary to a moral reasoning process that falls straight out of the Kantian tradition. Trying to understand how people think and feel about specific issues prior to action is inherent to the moral principle "respect for persons" that has been attempted to be interpreted into educational practices by Pratte (1992), Nyberg (1991), Peters (1966), Katz (1991) and countless others. "Understanding people's sensitivities" as a means to guiding action can be considered as a simple, shorthand, alternative expression of Rawl's "Veil of Ignorance"[13] which is designed to facilitate considering the interests of others prior to specific judgements being made (1972, pp136-142)[14].

Disagreements over how to best describe European arrival in Australia is a moral issue because it is also an example of what Freire referred to as people attempting to name, and in this case, **rename,** the

---

[13]Rawls idea here is to provide a process for making fair and just judgements. Basically, what is required is that all parties to the specific judgement to be made deliberate from a position of ignorance of who they are and what interests they have and/or represent. In this specific instance, the decision of whether to refer to the landing of Europeans as a *settling* or *invasion* would be the result of deliberations by specific individuals who would be ignorant of whether, after they have arrived at a decision, they would be Aborigine, Anglo-Saxon or any other kind of Australian.

[14]The post-modern line here is to respond that "considering the interests of all" is a shibboleth, a slogan for The Rationalist Party. Left uninterpreted, it is a high and mighty maxim of which Captain Jean-Luc Picard would be proud. The maxim is empty and meaningless until acted on. Here the specific criticism would be: "What would it mean in terms of people's actions and everyday lives to claim that all Australians' interests were considered prior to deciding what we would tell children about European arrival in Australia?".

world (1985, p.61)[15]. A (re)naming to *"...exist humanly ... to change* [the world] (ibid)[16].

In this particular case it is a (re)naming that could contribute to the fully human becoming of both aboriginal **and** non-aboriginal Australians. Why? Non-Aborigine Australians would no longer have to live with that self-serving myth that differences in material rewards and conditions between them and Aborigines are the result of "racial" and genetic differences in the ability and willingness to work and to work hard, to be clean and live healthily. Aborigines would no longer have to buy into this same, but for them, self-destructive myth, that often seems the only explanation for the conditions that many of them are in.

If Premier Goss was sincere about promoting the general public's "understanding of the sensitivities of other people", he could have used this opportunity to help Queenslanders to reflect on, and reconsider, how much they have personally contributed to understanding or not understanding the sensitivities of Aborigines. Instead, Goss played the political game, couched the issue in "politically correct" terms and lost the opportunity to add an openly moral perspective to a fundamental aspect of Australian history: The treatment of its indigenous population. In couching the issue in "politically correct" rather than "moral" terms, Goss opened the floodgates for both the petty carpers and those who disagree on moral grounds (but would rather not say so).

Opposition Leader Borbidge believes *invasion* should not be used. His comments reported in the Rockhampton Bulletin were as follows:

> *[T]he [social studies unit] was an indoctrination and social engineering and that history was being rewritten to keep champions of political correctness and left-wing social engineers happy* (**The Rockhampton Bulletin**, 10/2/94)

Again, couching the issue along politically correct lines poisons the well before any "understanding of sensitivities" can start. Any opportunity for some semblance of a reasonable debate is immediately hindered. And

---

[15] Renaming **past** events, occurrences, etc poses its own unique problems. Problems that are always present in any historical research. In this instance we have the arrival of Europeans in Australia that was experienced by various people who no longer exist. The event was interpreted by those who witnessed it and various processes were used for recording those interpretations, eg written and oral histories. As generations came and went this process continued with interpretations of the "recorded" histories, interpretations of those interpretations themselves and even new interpretations of the original event. By suggesting this historically interpretive process I hope to allay any fears that I am assuming a form of rigid conceptual determinism. I do not consider any event as "given" or our ideas and language are forever under the complete sway and dictate of "events". Like Berman (1992), I would argue that "...[l]anguage shapes our perceptions of reality, but it is also shaped and changed by the creation of new ideas and words. The relationship between language and mind is thus essentially dialectical" (p.424).

16. The Social Studies Unit includes this citation from a Government Resident's Report on the Northern Territory for 1890, SAPP, II, No 28, p.9, taken from H. Reynolds **Problems In Australian History: Aborigines and Settlers. The Australian Experience 1788-1939** (1972) to support this view: "After careful inquiry I am of the opinion that this is the attitude of the aborigines towards Europeans. Entrance into their country is an act of invasion". To name the arrival of Europeans in Australia as an *invasion* is not just some leftist bleeding-heart meddling.

this strategy is also a useful foil to conceal any personal values, beliefs and assumptions that may be suspect or questionable. Advocates of political correctness are easy targets.

The Archbishop of Brisbane also recognises that the "invasion" issue is a moral one when he states that it is one of those initiatives which is *"...striving to redress historical injustices, change public attitudes and empower the victims of discrimination"*. Unfortunately, he still talks in terms of political correctness rather than morality (**The Sunday Mail**, 13/2/94).

Now one would have thought that if there was anyone who wanted to redress historical injustices on moral rather than political, social or cultural grounds then it would be an Archbishop. Surely, one of the roles of the Church and its leaders is to help us learn (tell us?) right from wrong regardless of time, place and existential circumstances, assuming this is possible at all. One possible reason for the Archbishop's switch is that politically correct explanations require less intellectual energy than moral ones.

In the end of course, the Archbishop and the Church can help us no better than Kant could. All have and had to rely on the fundamentally limited ability of human beings to decide for themselves about what counts as an "injustice". What actions can be said to be just or not is, in the end, up to "just us", human beings. How the world, the events within it and the human relation to it should be named is dependent on human beings too.

Naming the world of course does not necessarily lead to acting in and on it but there is enough evidence to believe that it can. If this were not the case then why be a parent, why teach? Teaching itself is fundamentally a communicative activity and naming the world is central to the communication between teachers and students. Teachers contribute to students being able to name objects, places, people and human actions and to be disposed to name these in particular ways.

How teachers communicate with students is no less a teaching **practice** than developing lesson plans, drawing OHTs and enforcing classroom rules. Talking and writing, staring and pointing, pausing and sighing and the many other simple and sophisticated means teachers draw on to communicate with students are all facets of a teacher's practice. The ordinary language[17] use of *practice* supports this view[18].

The reason I am using *practice* in this paper to refer to a teacher's actions, even seemingly simple ones like word usage, is because I am very much concerned with how the language that teachers use affects not just students learning but also contributes to substantive changes in material conditions and relations between human beings[19]. To argue that teachers

---

[17]'Ordinary language' marks one side of a distinction introduced by analytical philosophers. It is a distinction between English words at their most vague and ambiguous and those same words used in a much more limited and stipulated sense. For example, 'force' has many meanings in ordinary language. In the language of science it has a very strict use and meaning.

[18]Teachers often talk about changing this or that practice, even when it includes changes in how they communicate. It would not be unusual to hear teachers commenting that they were going to change their **practice** of referring to the "discovery of Australia" with the "invasion of Australia". We might object or disagree with this practice, but the use of *practice* here does not stretch the ordinary language use of it.

[19]A personal example to the point arose from my teaching experiences in the US. I was brought to task by some undergraduate students for writing comments on their papers in red ink. To me, it made no difference which colour I used. To them, they had been informed by teacher trainers that this was not good practice and that red ink always "spelt trouble".

can change the world is not some radical Marxist rallying cry either. Anyone who has worked with beginning teachers will have at least one student who professed that they became teachers to "change the lives of students", to "make a difference". And we probably all have heard of some specific teacher who has achieved this, even if with only one student. Teachers who have not been completely demoralised by the hard work of teaching often hang on to these beliefs and through their teaching contribute to changing society in ways they believe admirable. In this sense, they are all Marxists - they believe that by their labour they will make change happen.

The importance of teachers as agents of change and the moral nature of their work is also acknowledged in the Corporate Plan for the Queensland Education Department. The Departmental Standard For Inclusive Curriculum affirms that *"...education has a moral purpose ... to make a difference in the lives of students ... teachers are agents of educational change and societal improvement"* (p.2, Department of Education memo). Here I am suggesting that encouraging teachers to be philosophically critical about how they communicate with students is one place to start in understanding the moral purpose of education and contributing to societal improvement.

A teacher's critical reflection on how they communicate with students, the specific symbols they use in their communication, and the ideas, concepts, values, assumptions and material phenomena they are taken to represent can help both teachers and students question those everyday assumptions and beliefs that can be, and often are, foundational to an objectionable view of the states of affairs. Not because...

> *...we reject certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things - they are, on the contrary, the consistent, theme of philosophy - but because, being the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them into view we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them* (Merleau-Ponty in Greene, 1988, p.122).

A critical analysis of how we name specific events (even other people) and the assumptions that underlie this naming can also further Goss's claimed aim of trying to understand the sensitivities of others. It can serve to promote that empathic sensitivity which is required in order to view and understand events and issues from the perspectives of others. As Hamilton suggests, empathy is *"...our vehicle for understanding one another in a meaningful way* (1984, p.217). One way to understand Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders "in a meaningful way" is to conceptualize the landing of Europeans in Australia in *invasion* terms instead of *settled* or *landed* ones.

Whether policies, practices, material conditions or relations between Australians change as a result of this empathizing is another matter entirely. There is a world of difference between understanding and acting. Nonetheless, understanding and new ways of understanding can be furthered by conceptualizing familiar events and happenings in new ways.

In the end, individual teachers in particular classrooms at specific times and places will have to decide for themselves how to refer to the arrival of Europeans in Australia. The decision to refer to this event as a *landing, settling, invasion, non-indigenous occupation* or otherwise can be the result of a process ranging from critical analysis to blind habit. Context will always have a significant bearing on this process because schools

often have formal or informal policies regarding what teachers can and should say or do. Sometimes these policies will reinforce each teacher's personal interpretations and valuations, other times they will be in direct conflict. In the latter situation teachers will also often have to play the political game and suppress their own views in order to remain in employment or in good favour with parents, peers and supervisors. For those whose views are in accord with school policy, peers and parental wishes in general, all will be well with the world.

Teachers necessarily have to operate from some sense of personal policy. Specific policies, like rules, are judgements intended to guide, even dictate, action. Judgements require justification and judgements have a history. A critical examination of that history; which parties disagree, which parties were included, who benefited and who lost as a result of specific decisions is necessary to understanding why there are some policies rather than others in schools and classrooms.

Many similar opportunities for critical reflection arise within the political correctness debate. The opportunity is there to examine the *"...crust of conventionalised and routine consciousness"* (Dewey, 1954, p.183) that language is a fundamental example of. In equipping and encouraging teachers to sort out the criticism from the carping they may find that there is often a lot more at stake than scratchings on paper and noises out of mouths when people appear to be arguing about word use and meaning.

Conclusion

Language and the use of words lies at the heart of teaching practice and human learning in general. Why? Because as I have argued, communicating with students, in whatever form, is fundamental and necessary to teaching itself. Teaching is nothing more than a very sophisticated, rich and complex form of communication where both teacher and learner struggle to name the world for themselves and yet are forever frustrated in that naming by human limitations. By the way both intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts limits and underpins that naming itself.

Yet saying something, and even saying nothing, are fundamental components of teaching practice and a teacher's often-practiced practice, even a one of always following policy, is an opportunity for critical reflection, for philosophical criticism. Good teaching practice can be the result of examining reasons, of assessing competing arguments and considering what the various alternatives for practice might be and mean in the actual lives of the students they deal with.

I believe that substantial changes in the material conditions of human beings and the relations between them can be initiated and encouraged by a focus on the language we use to communicate with others. Parents do this all the time and so do teachers. Ironically, parents are probably more aware of the importance of this process than teachers[20].

In the first section of this paper I have tried to identify a specific kind of focus. Not a simple one on words - what they look like and what they are taken to mean - but one on how differences in meaning often result in

---

[20]I make this claim because intuitively it seems that parents very often see the socialization of their children into appropriate language use as a means to teach them the values they possess, eg family prohibitions on swear words, how to refer to coloured people, to disabled people. Teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to view words used in classroom settings as embedded in "knowledge", in specific disciplines and hence may consider the inculcation of students into appropriate word usage as "objective" as the "knowledge" specific words are associated with.

specific material conditions, relations between people and the world and with each other[21].

I have not given much attention to whether focusing on language, even in the manner specified, is enough to bring about change. That is a can of worms I have consciously avoided and I readily admit that getting teachers to reflect critically on how they communicate with students guarantees nothing.

There is no doubt though that a teacher's use of language is a personal action. Communicating with learners is teaching practice. Specific and actual teaching practices are personal actions that are sometimes performed consciously, sometimes not. Some specific practices are the result of policy, either personal or public (eg, school, professional, community), while probably many more get performed habitually, reflexively, devoid of critical reflection.

Both policy and practice are informed by and embedded in personal politics. Teachers work within a framework of various educational policies and the decision whether to act consistent with a policy or not is a political one. Teachers have to play the political game of judging how to act and actually acting in a way that satisfies themselves, other teachers and parents which is consistent with giving students the best education they can provide. Thus, teachers face a dilemma, they have to...

> *...work at two levels simultaneously - to face the immediate problem of doing the best (so far as they cans see it) for their clients whilst appreciating all the time that these very actions may help to reproduce the structure within which the problems arise* (Willis, 1977, p.186)

If we accept these premises, then discussions and debates that seem to focus on word usage and meaning, such as examples evident in the political correctness debate, will be revealed for what they are: Disagreements about the way the world ought to be, the kind of life that people find desirable, how human beings should relate to one another and the material world. About who should get what jobs, who should stay at home and parent, about what education is and should be for.

Encouraging teachers to attempt a more than cursory examination of the various communicative symbols they use can be one opportunity to encourage them to reflect critically on their teaching practice. In being philosophically critical about how they communicate with students and what they use to communicate with, much can be revealed about deep-seated assumptions, values and beliefs that the language-using community or communities they are members of hold. It can also reveal that dialectical relationship between material conditions and the ideas of human beings that Marx so insightfully identified.

However, if we try this tack, there are two fundamental problems to be faced. One, we are dealing with an aspect of human existence that is so fundamental to our existence, so "given", seemingly as "real" and "natural" as the material world itself, we may be accused of being ivory-tower academics who have nothing better to do than worry about our specialised interests (which in this case is a highly focused one concerned with words and meanings). Two, we may forget that it is not words and meaning that is the issue but rather how the lives of individual people get lived.

---

[21] For instance, the conceptual limitations of 'family' have specific ramifications for social security payments, child care allowance and paid leave for particular employees.

Paradoxically, this means that we have to apply the skills of philosophical criticism and critical reflection to that very phenomena that is often most resistant to it: Language.

One way to deal with this resistance is to use those examples that are already being discussed and contested in the general community. There are enough examples in the political correctness debate familiar to most Australians that could serve to highlight perceived problematic material conditions and human concerns. Skilling teachers in being able to sort out the philosophical criticism from the petty carping is one place to start.

Bibliography

Berlin, I. (1969) **Four Essays on Liberty.** Oxford University Press, London.

Berman, B.J. (1993) "Only A Glancing Blow" in **Science as Culture**, Vol. 3, Part 3, No. 16. Free Association Press, London.

Davidson, D. (1991) **Inquiries into Truth & Interpretation.** Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Dewey, J. (1954) **The Public and Its Problems**, Swallow Press, Athens, Ohio.

Freire, P. (1985) **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**. Pelican Books, Middlesex.

Gilligan, C. (1982) **In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.** Harvard University Press, Massachusetts.

Greene, M. (1993) "Diversity and Inclusion: Toward a Curriculum for Human Beings", **Teachers College Record**, Volume 95, No.2, Winter, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York,

hooks, B. & West, C. (1991) **Breakin' Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life**. Southland Press, Boston.

Kant, I. (1981) **Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals.** Translated by James W. Ellington, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis.

Katz, M. (1991) "Respect for Persons: Charting Some Ethical Territory in **Philosophy of Education Society 1991: Proceedings of the Fourty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society**, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.

Kripke, SA. (1980) **Naming and Necessity**. Harvard University Press, Massachusetts.

Lehrer, K. (1990) **Theory of Knowledge**. Westview Press, Boulder.

Marx, K (1965) **The German Ideology**. Lawrence & Wishart, London.

Mill, J.S. (1978) **On Liberty**. Hackett Publishing Co. Indianapolis.

Noddings, N. (1984) **Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education**. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Nyberg, D. (1991) "The Basis of Respect is Empathy" in **Philosophy of Education Society 1991: Proceedings of the Fourty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society**, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.

Pappas & Swain (1978) eds. **Essays on Knowledge and Justification**. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Peters, R.S. (1966) **Ethics and Education**. George Allen & Unwin, London.

Plato (1979) **The Republic.** Penguin Books

Copying sponsored by Konica

Pratte, R. (1992) **Philosophy of Education: Two Traditions**. Charles C. Thomas, Illinois.

Quine, W.V.O. (1960) **Word & Object**. The MIT Press, Massachusetts.

Rawls, J. (1972) **A Theory of Justice**. Oxford University Press, London.

Russell, B (1988) **Logic and Knowledge**. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Saussure, F. de (1959) **Course in General Linguistics**. Philosophical Library, New York.

Straughan, R. (1988) **Can We Teach Children To Be Good?** Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

Willis, P. (1997) **Learning to Labour**. Columbia University Press, New York.

Wittgenstein, L. (1968) **Philosophical Investigations**. McMillan, New York.

Wiltshire, et al (1994) **Shaping the Future: Review of the Queensland School Curriculum**. Government Printer, Queensland.

Year 5 Social Studies Draft Replacement Unit 1. Studies Directorate, Queensland Department of Education, 1993.

Departmental Standard For Inclusive Curriculum. Queensland Department of Education memo, December 3, 1993.

Copying sponsored by Konica